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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether Future Farmers of America (FFA) members and non-members differed in their perception of the overall image of FFA and whether their perceptions were influenced by social and demographic characteristics. A questionnaire was administered to 404 first-year students enrolled in the Agriscience Applications course in 27 high schools in North Carolina. Participants responded by indicating the strength of their agreement or disagreement with 18 statements regarding FFA's image. Statistical analyses included the Pearson Product Moment Correlation and descriptive statistics. Findings indicated FFA members reported higher mean scores for every image item; both members and non-members agreed FFA is not just for those students who wish to become farmers; a student's decision to join or not join FFA was influenced by his/her perception of FFA's image in his/her school; a student's gender, ethnicity, enrollment choice, prior enrollment in an agriculture class, block scheduling, grade level, and extracurricular activities did not influence perception of FFA's image; students tended to join and participate in FFA when they believed it was able to meet a student's need for a sense of belonging; and social aspects of FFA were motivating factors in the desire to be members. The researchers concluded that FFA may need to work toward providing more sophisticated methods of instilling that sense of belonging and comradeship that FFA has enjoyed in its long history. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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Factors Influencing A Student's Perception of the Image of a Career and Technical Education Student Organization

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to determine if there is a difference between FFA members and non-members as to their perception of the overall image of the FFA, and to determine if students' perceptions of the image of the FFA are influenced by social and demographic characteristics. Data were collected using a questionnaire administered to 404 students enrolled in the Agriscience Applications course in 27 schools in North Carolina.

It can be concluded that: A student's decision to join or not join the FFA is influenced by their perception of the image of FFA in their school. A student's gender, ethnicity, enrollment choice, prior enrollment in an agriculture class, block scheduling, grade level and extracurricular activities do not influence their perceptions of the FFA organization's image. Students tend to join and participate in the FFA based upon the organization's ability to meet a student's need for a sense of belonging. Based upon the responses of members, the social aspects of the organization were motivating factors in their desire to be members. One traditional method that the FFA uses to encourage students to feel as if they belonged as members of the organization was through the use of the FFA jacket. Based upon this research, both FFA members and non-members hold a less than favorable opinion of the FFA jacket today. The FFA may need to work toward providing more sophisticated methods of instilling that sense of belonging and comradeship that the FFA has enjoyed in its long history.

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INTRODUCTION

Career and technical student organizations are valuable learning tools that both enhance and supplement instruction. Leadership and personal development is an important component of the career and technical student organizations, and they encourage members to develop life-essential skills such as citizenship and cooperation as part of their experience in the organization. While vocational education prepares students for careers, student organizations prepare students for a broad range of community interests. This systematic program of developing leadership, citizenship and cooperation is the essential purpose of the career and technical student organizations.

The National FFA Organization spends more than $7 million dollars annually to maintain existing programs and develop new programs for its membership (National FFA Foundation, 1997). In North Carolina, the state FFA association spends more than three hundred thousand dollars each year on career development events and leadership programs. An effort is made each year to create a relevant and service-oriented FFA organization in North Carolina. After three years of concerted effort from 1995 to 1998 to improve services to members, total membership did not increase. In 1998, approximately 16,000 students said "no" to the activities, programs and services of the North Carolina FFA Association (NCDPI, 1995).

The image of the FFA is defined as the mental picture that forms when certain characteristics about the FFA are brought to one's attention. This image can be either positive or negative and can be based upon known facts or supposition (The American Heritage College Dictionary, 1993). The value of the any member-based organization resides essentially in the minds of its members. Part of the value can be traced to tangible items such as a magazine subscription or a leadership manual while the remainder of the value of membership is found in intangible things such as sense of belonging or a feeling of pride by association with the organization (Sirkin and McDermott, 1995). If the organization has a positive image and provides members with a sense that their lives are more satisfying as a result of the association with the organization, then membership recruitment and retention is significantly easier (Sirkin and McDermott, 1995). The question arises as to whether agricultural education students have a positive perception of the FFA organization. Furthermore, are there social and demographic factors that are influencing a student's perception of the FFA's image?

Maslow introduced the concept of self-actualization in his book, Motivation and Personality. Maslow believed that the human individual is an integrated organism. It is impossible to separate the various components of a person's self. When an individual experiences hunger, it is their whole self that is hungry and not just selected physiological components. It is the whole person that has the desire for food, shelter and safety.

Maslow's theory rests upon the idea that an individual progresses through a series of stages during their lifetime. The stages are generally identified as physiological and safety needs, esteem needs, cognitive and aesthetic needs, and self-actualization. Even if all of the other needs are met, the individual will develop a sense of restlessness and

discontentment unless he or she is accomplishing goals true to oneself (Maslow, 1970). Maslow suggested that an individual progresses through this hierarchy in the order described. However, the order may be rearranged as a result of an individual's experiences (Weiten, 1989). Maslow's Hierarchy is relevant to this study in that it offers a basis for understanding potential reasons why students join and participate in youth organizations. If students are motivated by a sense of belonging, a desire for status, and a need to feel important, then this theory may explain why students tend to join and participate in the FFA organization.

In a study of 1121 rural and urban high school students in Indiana and Michigan, Frick, Birkenholz, Gardner and Machtmes (1995) found that students held a positive view of agriculture, even though they were not members of the FFA.

Scanlon, Yoder, Hoover and Johnson (1989) found that the top recruiting practices perceived to be most effective by teachers were participation in career development events, FFA activities and awards programs. Teachers also perceive personal contacts with prospective students by current students and recruitment presentations made to eighth graders as valuable recruiting tools. Scanlon, Yoder, Hoover and Johnson (1989) also found that eleventh grade FFA members reported that the development of leadership skills, the variety of local and state education activities, and the communication skills developed through FFA activities were the most common perceptions attributing to their decision to join the FFA. Among eleventh grade student who were not FFA members, the most common perceptions were that FFA activities were not interesting, take too much time out of school and interfere with other activities. The non-members also believe that they do not fit in with the farmer-type image projected by their high school agricultural education program.

Sutphin and Newsom-Stewart (1995) found that students held an overall perception that activity-centered learning, opportunities for work experience, and teamwork and life skills were valuable and good reasons for enrolling in agricultural education courses. The study also found that no significant ethnic difference existed in the students' decisions to study agriculturally related courses with respect to preparation for jobs and higher education, social and development skills, peer pressure, enhancement of academic skills, and the activity-centered nature of agricultural education courses (Sutphin, Newsom-Stewart).

One major educational reform initiative is the implementation of block scheduling in high schools. In a study involving 142 agricultural education programs in North Carolina, Becton (1996) found that teachers believed that block scheduling has a deleterious effect on FFA member recruitment and retention. Furthermore, block scheduling was perceived to have little impact on classroom instruction or supervised agricultural experience. Communication between teachers and students not currently enrolled in agriculture classes was identified as a major problem. Wortman (1997) found that students who did not serve in official leadership positions in the local FFA chapter had no significant positive or negative perception regarding block scheduling and is

impact on FFA activities. Students who served as FFA officers reported that block scheduling negatively influenced student participation in FFA activities.

Talbert and Larke (1995) found that minority students, especially minority females were underrepresented in agricultural education. Also, minority students had more negative perceptions about agriculture than non-minority students did. With regard to FFA participation, minority students have fewer role models. They reported that minority students saw themselves as unlikely candidates for careers in the agriculture industry.

In North Carolina, the Latino population has risen significantly over the last eight years. The number of Latinos enrolled in North Carolina schools has risen an average of 285% in the last eight years. Factors identified as critical challenges to involving Hispanic students in FFA activities were the lack of role models in agricultural education for Hispanic youth, the absence of FFA promotional and instructional materials prepared in the Spanish language, and the unavailability of agricultural education teachers that can speak Spanish fluently in order to communicate with students (Martinez, 1998).

PURPOSE

The purpose of the study was to determine:

1. If there a difference between FFA members and non-members as to their perception of the overall image of the FFA.
2. Are students' perceptions of the image of the FFA influenced by gender, ethnicity and FFA membership status?
3. Are students' perceptions of the image of the FFA influenced by enrollment choice, prior enrollment in an agriculture class and FFA membership status?
4. Are students' perceptions of the image of the FFA influenced by block scheduling and FFA membership status?
5. Is there a relationship between a student's grade level and their perceptions of the image of the FFA?
6. Is there a relationship between the number of clubs and formal athletic activities in which a student participates and their perceptions of the image of the FFA?

METHODS

The population for this study is first year students of agricultural education who were enrolled in the Agriscience Applications course in North Carolina schools. This was the first opportunity that most students should have had to join the FFA organization. Four hundred and four students were selected for the study based upon the geographic region in which their school is located. Schools selected for this study all had FFA chapters and were categorized as having 33% or less FFA membership, 34-66%

membership, or 67-99% membership. An equal number of schools were selected in each membership percentage category.

Because this is descriptive research, a questionnaire was developed based upon a series of FFA program characteristics. Participants were asked to respond by indicating their agreement with a series of 18 statements regarding the image of the FFA. The response choices and their numerical values are as follows: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1, and Do Not Know = 0. The midpoint of this scale was 2.5, and all mean scores above this number were interpreted be in agreement with the item. All mean scores below 2.5 were considered to be in disagreement with the item and items with a mean score of 2.5 were interpreted to represent a neutral opinion.

The scaled items were derived from the objectives of the FFA Local Program Success Model (National FFA Organization, 1997a). The Local Program Success Model was created and developed by experts in agricultural education for the purpose of improving local agricultural education programs. The researcher's graduate advisory committee, as a panel of experts in agricultural education and FFA, identified additional items to be included in the survey instrument and modified some items derived from the Local Program Success Model. The instrument was field tested and yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.88 as a measure of internal consistency of the instrument.

The data were collected and tabulated using Microsoft Excel® and transferred to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 8.0.0® for Windows®. The first procedure involved an analysis of descriptive statistics in order to have a clear profile of the sample. Descriptive statistics were generated for gender, ethnicity, grade level, prior enrollment, enrollment choice, block schedule characteristics of the school, FFA membership status, and number of clubs in which survey respondents were members.

The next procedure involved an analysis of the first research question. A multivariate analysis was used to examine the 18 image items simultaneously. If differences were determined to exist between FFA member and non-member perceptions, one-way analyses of variance determined which items accounted for the overall differences. A multivariate analysis of variance test was performed to determine if students' perceptions of the FFA image were influenced by selected demographic and school characteristics as described in research questions two through four. For those multivariate analyses that yielded significant differences in the main effects of independent variables, a one-way analysis of variance was performed to pinpoint any significant differences.

Prior to any multivariate analyses, the dependent variables were compared using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic to determine if a significant correlation existed between the scaled items on the survey instrument. Hotelling's Trace was the statistic used to determine the level of significance in each multivariate analysis. In addition, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic was used to answer research question five by determining if a relationship existed between the grade level of students and the students' perception of the FFA image and question six by determining if a

relationship existed between the number of clubs in which students were members and their perceptions of the FFA image.

RESULTS

The majority of study participants were males, constituting 76 % of the data sample. In all, there were 308 males and 96 females in the data sample. Females comprised 22.6 % of the members and 24.5 % of the non-members in the study. Of all participants in the study, 41.5 % indicated that they were FFA members and 58.5 % were non-members. Two hundred ninety nine Caucasian students and 102 non-Caucasian students participated in the study. Because of the low numbers of certain ethnic groups in the sample population, all ethnic groups except Caucasian were combined for data analysis. Freshmen made up 51.7 % of the students in the survey while seniors were the fewest number of students in the sample, comprising only 5.7 % of the sample. With respect to club participation, 34% of respondents indicated that they were not members of any club or school organization and did not participate in any kind of extracurricular athletic sport. This constituted the largest number of responses in the sample. More FFA members participated in clubs and athletic activities than non-members. Participants in the study were also asked to provide data regarding their choices in signing up for Agriscience Applications. The majority of students reported that they signed up for the class by their own free will and that this was their first agriculture class. Eighty-nine percent of the students in this study report that their school is on a block schedule system.

A multivariate analysis was performed using as the dependent variables the items on the instrument designed to measure students' opinions of the FFA organization's image. The independent variable was FFA membership status. This analysis yielded a Hotelling's Trace value of 0.379 ($p<.05$). Therefore, a significant difference exists between FFA members and non-members with regard to their opinions of the FFA organization's image. Table 1 represents the results of the analysis of data gathered from survey respondents as to their opinion of the overall image of the FFA.

FFA members reported higher mean scores than non-members for every image item. Both members and non-members agreed that the FFA is not just for those students who wish to become farmers. Members generated a mean score of 3.29 ($SD=0.75$) and non-members generated a mean score of 3.12 ($SD=0.71$) for this item. Members also rated highly the item that the FFA is for all students not just an elite few ($M=3.25$, $SD=0.82$). Members indicated that they were familiar with the FFA prior to signing up for the agriculture course ($M=3.10$, $SD=0.65$). The FFA members in the study indicated that they thought that the FFA was a "cool" organization and would join the FFA in future years if given the chance ($M=3.13$, $SD=0.66$). They also indicated that the FFA at their school had a great image ($M=3.07$, $SD=0.77$). FFA members had received a lot of information about the FFA ($M=3.24$, $SD=0.66$). Members indicated that the FFA advisor and their parents had encouraged them to join the FFA and that many of their friends were members of the FFA organization. The FFA advisor scored higher than parents or friends as recruiters for the FFA ($M=3.14$, $SD=0.77$).

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FFA members in the study indicated that being in the FFA was cost effective, considering the amount of FFA activities available to them and the cost of participation in these activities (M=3.07, SD=0.81). FFA members indicated that participation in the FFA was worth at least the cost of the membership dues (M=3.21, SD=0.77). Overall, FFA members rated the FFA as an organization that has a positive influence on their social standing in school, that many of their friends are involved in the organization, and that FFA members are people who treat others with kindness and respect. FFA members did not entirely agree with all items regarding the FFA organization's image. The members in the study indicated that they did not like the official FFA jacket (M=2.40, SD=0.94).

Non-members agreed that they knew about the FFA before signing up for the agriculture class (M=2.67, SD = 0.88) and that they had been provided with a lot of information about the FFA (M=2.80, SD=0.82). Non-members also indicated that the FFA had a great image at their school (M=2.71, SD=0.88). Furthermore, non-members reported that the local FFA chapter had many FFA activities (M=2.70, SD=0.85) and that these activities were for all students regardless of their ethnicity (M=3.25, SD=0.68). On average, both FFA members and non-members agreed that the FFA was an organization open to students of both genders and all ethnic groups. Non-members also indicated that joining the FFA was cost effective (M=2.66, SD=0.84).

With regard to recruiting practices, non-members indicated that their FFA advisor encouraged them to join the FFA organization (M=2.73, SD=0.83) and that the local FFA chapter has many activities in which members can participate (M=2.70, SD=0.85). Non-members reported that most of their friends were not FFA members (M=2.22, SD=0.91) and non-members agreed with FFA members in their dislike of the FFA jacket (M=1.97, SD=0.93).

Students' Perceptions of the FFA Image as Influenced by Selected School and Demographic Factors

There were no significant differences identified in the interaction effects between FFA membership status, gender and ethnicity. FFA membership status and prior enrollment and enrollment choice in an agriculture class had no significant effect the opinions of students. A school's block scheduling status did not significantly influence the respondents' opinion of the FFA image. Furthermore, the interaction effect of FFA membership status and block scheduling did not yield significant differences.

A Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of 0.08 (p=.13) for the correlation between FFA organizational image and the respondent's grade level was generated. Based upon these results, there was not a significant relationship between the respondents' grade level and their opinions of the FFA organization's image. Another Pearson Product Moment Correlation was computed to test the significance of the relationship between the respondents' level of participation in school organizations on their opinions of the FFA image. A correlation coefficient of 0.096 (p=.11) for the FFA

organizational image was generated. There was no significant relationship found between the respondents' level of participation in school organizations and their opinions of the FFA organization's image.

Table 1
Perceptions of Members and Non-Members of the Overall Image of the FFA.

FFA Image Items	Members (n=167)		Non-Members (n=237)		F
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
The FFA has activities for all students regardless of whether they are male or female.	3.45	0.56	3.41	2.23	0.06
The FFA has activities for all students regardless of race.	3.41	0.66	3.25	0.68	5.03*
I would join the FFA in the future if given the chance.	3.29	0.75	2.42	0.95	80.96*
The FFA is only for students who want to be farmers.	3.29	0.75	3.12	0.71	4.71*
The FFA is for all students in my agriculture class, not just a few elite students.	3.25	0.82	3.07	0.73	5.51*
I have been provided with a lot of information about the FFA.	3.24	0.66	2.80	0.82	31.38*
The benefits I would receive from being in the FFA are worth at least the cost of the FFA membership dues.	3.21	0.77	2.66	0.84	35.13*
My agriculture teacher encouraged me to join the FFA.	3.14	0.77	2.73	0.83	24.64*
I think that the FFA is a cool organization.	3.13	0.66	2.54	0.93	43.32*
The FFA information I have seen looks modern and up-to-date with other student organizations.	3.11	0.69	2.93	2.28	0.85

*p<.05. 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

Table 1 Continued

Perceptions of Members and Non-Members of the Overall Image of the FFA.

FFA Image Items	Members (n=167)		Non-Members (n=237)		F
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
FFA members at my school are nice people who treat non-members with respect.	3.11	0.65	2.88	0.77	8.76*
I knew what the FFA was before signing up for the class.	3.10	0.65	2.67	0.88	23.58*
The FFA has a great image at our school.	3.07	0.77	2.71	0.88	14.94*
Participation in the FFA does not cost much.	3.07	0.81	2.97	2.66	0.23
A lot of my friends are FFA members.	3.01	0.81	2.22	0.91	72.38*
Our school has a lot of FFA activities.	2.94	0.66	2.70	0.85	6.33*
My parents encouraged me to join the FFA.	2.58	0.79	1.86	0.72	70.15*
I like the FFA jacket, regardless of whether or not I am a member.	2.40	0.94	1.97	0.93	17.97*

*$p<.05$. 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion 1: A student's decision to join or not join the FFA is influenced by their perceptions of the image of the FFA organization in their school.

In general, FFA members' responses to items related to the image of the FFA organization were significantly more positive than the responses of non-members.

Conclusion 2: A student's gender and ethnicity do not influence their perceptions of the image projected by the FFA organization in their school.

Students' responses to items on the questionnaire were not significantly influenced by gender and ethnicity. The FFA has developed numerous recruiting materials in recent

years that not only represent the current ethnic and gender characteristics of the membership, but also portray what FFA membership could be if it were more diverse in ethnicity and gender.

Conclusion 3: Voluntary enrollment in an agriculture class and prior enrollment in an agriculture class does not influence a student's perceptions of the image projected by the FFA organization in their school.
This study did not find that student's enrollment choice or prior enrollment in an agriculture class made a significant difference in their decision to join or not join the FFA. Students who are involuntarily enrolled in an agricultural class may not necessarily be adverse to joining the FFA, just as students who voluntarily enroll in an agriculture class are not necessary motivated to join the FFA.

Conclusion 4: Block scheduling does not influence a student's perceptions of the image projected by the FFA organization in their school.
Once considered to be an obstacle in the planning and implementation of FFA activities (Becton, 1996), block scheduling did not influence students' decision to the extent that it either encourages or discourages membership. North Carolina schools have been utilizing block scheduling for a number of years, and perhaps FFA advisors have begun effectively recruit and retain FFA members under the system. Because a low number of students were on a traditional schedule, it would be imprudent to generalize the results of the analysis of this research question to the entire population of students that were enrolled in Agriscience Applications in the spring of 1999.

Conclusion 5: Grade level does not influence a student's perceptions of the image projected by the FFA organization in their school.
This study did not find a relationship between a student's grade level and their FFA membership status.

Conclusion 6: The scope of participation in school clubs and formal athletic activities does not influence a student's perceptions of the image projected by the FFA organization in their school.
The scope of participation in school clubs and organizations might be effective in characterizing the students who might join and participate in FFA activities, but it does not singularly affect a student's opinions of the FFA organization's image.

The results of this study are supported in the literature by Maslow (1970). At an age when most students are becoming eligible for FFA membership, they are also entering a period of human growth and development characterized by a need for contact, intimacy and a sense of belonging. The implications are significant for the FFA and agricultural education in that students tend to join and participate in the FFA based upon the organization's ability to meet a student's need for a sense of belonging. The FFA should continue to seek ways to involve all members in positive personal growth activities that allow students to experience that sense of belonging. Based upon the responses of members, the social aspects of the organization were motivating factors in

their desire to be members. However, the students today are not necessarily interested in some of the traditions of the FFA.

One traditional method that the FFA uses to encourage students to feel as if they belonged as members of the organization was through the use of the FFA jacket. Students today hold a less than favorable opinion of the FFA jacket today. The FFA may need to work toward providing more sophisticated methods of instilling that sense of belonging and comradeship that the FFA has enjoyed in its long history. Agriculture teachers should not necessarily rely on traditional methods for recruiting and retaining members in the FFA. The FFA services provided to students in years past will not necessarily bring students into FFA membership today. Agriculture teachers should appreciate the traditions of their profession, and use these traditions as motivators to teach effectively. Modern recruiting methods should be developed that capitalize on the favorable impression created by the FFA organization's image.

The findings that emerged from this study led to certain recommendations pertaining to future research. The proposed research might be valuable for those factors reported as being significant for both non-member and FFA members. A proposal would be to conduct a study to determine the continued need for the official FFA jacket. Both the majority of members and non-members expressed negative opinions as to the style of the FFA jacket. The official FFA jacket has been in use for much of the FFA's history and is a highly recognizable symbol of the organization. Perhaps a study would identify the continued value of the FFA jacket to the organization and suggest alternatives to its use.

Another proposal would be to conduct research into the area of gender and ethnic diversity among agricultural education students. While this study found that no significant differences exist between students of differing ethnic backgrounds, the low number of ethnic minorities in this study necessitates the need for additional study.

For more than 70 years, the FFA has endeavored to make a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education. The FFA advisor must be considered to be a major factor in this endeavor. At one school, the students were in the process of completing the survey instrument when a student raised his hand and, referring to an item on the questionnaire on the instrument, asked the instructor, "Have you encouraged us to join the FFA?" After a pause, the instructor was forced to answer in the negative. In this researcher's opinion, the most disappointing answer given by a student during the administration of the survey instrument was that he or she, "didn't join the FFA because it isn't at my school anymore".

The agriculture teacher has the primary responsibility of seeing that the FFA is an important and functional part of the agricultural education curriculum. He or she must secure positive school and community support for FFA programs and encourage students to participate in these programs. The success or failure of the FFA organization may depend upon a multitude of factors, but the FFA advisor is perhaps the most important factor in the equation.

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